

# Introduction to Ethics

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# What is the study of Ethics?

- One of the oldest subjects of study on earth.
- We are discussing no small matter, but how we *ought* to live. (Plato, “The Republic” 390 BC)
- “[T]he greatest madness of all is to live life as it is, rather than as it *should* be.” (Cervantes, “Don Quixote” approx. 1600 AD)
- Ought, Should, bad, good, obligation, duty...all normative words, when discussing ethical theory these are words to pay attention to and use very carefully.

# Written Exercise

- On your piece of paper write the following two things.
  - First, finish this sentence:
    - “Generally, in order to be ethical, I *ought* to....”
  - Second, in short paragraph form (2-4 sentences) answer the following question:
    - “If I could magically and safely go back and witness any event in human history, what would I want to witness and why?”

# Moral Questions

- Is it ever morally permissible (or even obligatory) to lie? If so, under what circumstances?

# Moral Questions

- Is one ever morally permitted (or even obligated) to kill or harm another human? If so, under what circumstances?

# Moral Theories

- So what we have turned up rather quickly is that obviously simple general moral rules like “Don’t lie” or “Don’t harm” or “Don’t kill” won’t do.
- It seems that some cases of lying harming and killing are permissible or even obligatory. But what is the fundamental difference between those that are morally prohibited, and the few that are allowed or even obligatory???
- We need a moral theory that serves as a guide for action. That is why we do ethics!

# Three Layers of Ethical Theory

- Meta-Ethics
  - Concerned with the origin of moral normativity (the force behind moral rules).
  - What is it in the world that pushes us in one direction or the other on ethical questions? Where does the force of moral normativity come from?
  - Is it God's will?
  - Is it what we evolved to do?
  - Or is it something much more interesting than either of those?

# Three Layers of Ethical Theory

- Normative Ethics
  - Concerned with building up a general model of how we ought to consider ethical questions.
  - Should I always maximize happiness? Whose Happiness?
  - Or should I always preserve human life at all costs?
  - Or should I simply do what my society tells me?



# Three Layers of Ethical Theory

- Applied Ethics
  - Concerned with applying what we have learned in the previous two layers to actual human situations.
  - Is it morally permissible to abort? Under what circumstances?
  - Should I tell my friend his wife is having an affair?
  - Should this school give preference to applicants of under-represented ethnic groups?

# Political/Social Ethics

- Some questions in political philosophy:
- What gives the US government the right to judge what is right and wrong, and coerce me to comply just because I am a citizen?
- When is a government illegitimate?
- What does our rich nation owe poor starving ones?

# The PHILOSOPHICAL study of Ethics

- Our exploration of the subject of ethics will be subject to the rules of philosophical inquiry.
- This means we will proceed via arguments.
- Arguments use **premises** (things we already know) to establish **conclusions** (things we don't know yet).
- The following is an example of a rigorous moral philosophical argument:

# The PHILOSOPHICAL study of Ethics

- ❖ **Premise 1:** Murder is always impermissible. (definition of murder)
- ❖ **Premise 2:** Killing in self-defense is permissible. (moral intuition)
- ✓ **Conclusion A:** Killing in self-defense is not murder. (from P1, P2 and the law of non-contradiction)
- ❖ **Premise 3:** Abortion in the case of a pregnancy that threatens the life of the mother is killing in self defense. (definition of self-defense)
- ✓ **Conclusion B:** Aborting in cases of a pregnancy that threatens the life of the mother is not murder. (from conclusion A and P3)

# The PHILOSOPHICAL study of Ethics

- Some basic rules for rigorous and rule-guided argumentation.
- In the following the letters X and Y stand for any sentences that make claims about the world that could be true or false (propositions).
- **Modus Ponens:**
  - If X then Y
  - X
  - ✓ Therefore Y

– If it has rained then the ground is wet.

# The PHILOSOPHICAL study of Ethics

- **Modus Tollens:**

- If X then Y

- Not Y

- ✓ Therefore not X

- If it has rained then the ground is wet.

- The ground is not wet.

- ✓ Therefore it has not rained.

# The PHILOSOPHICAL study of Ethics

- Fallacies, or common mistakes:
- **Affirming the Consequent:**
  - If X then Y
  - Y
  - ✓ Therefore X
- If it has rained then the ground is wet.
- The ground is wet.
- ✓ Therefore it has rained.

- Fallacies, or common mistakes:
- **Negating the Antecedent:**
  - If X then Y
  - Not X
  - ✓ Therefore not Y
- If it has rained then the ground is wet.
- It has not rained.
- ✓ Therefore the ground is not wet.



# Validity

- An argument is only valid if, assuming the premises are true, the conclusion must be as well.
- Notice that this is a formal, procedural requirement. Validity does not require the premises or the conclusion to actually be true, it merely requires a certain kind of relationship between the premises and the conclusion.

# Soundness

- Definition: An argument is only sound if it is valid, and its premises are true.
- This is a substantial requirement. It demands the truth of the premises in addition to validity.
- This is the holy grail of philosophical arguments. If you admit that an argument is sound, you must accept the conclusion on pain of irrationality.

# Sample Arguments

- Is this a valid argument? Is it sound?
  - I bet Wally likes beer. Wally is a graduate student and all graduate students like beer.
  - Conditional form:
    - If one is a graduate student then one likes beer.
    - Wally is a graduate student.
    - ✓ Therefore Wally likes beer.

# Arguments

- Is this a sound argument?
- There are still certain golf clubs that one can't join just because one is a woman. I am not a woman, therefore I can join any golf club I want.
- Conditional form:
  - If I am a woman then there are certain golf clubs I can't join.
  - I am not a woman.
  - ✓ Therefore there are no golf clubs I cannot join.

# Where do we start?

- We are going to start at the beginning. The oldest piece of moral philosophy known to the world (and one of the oldest pieces of philosophy period) is still one of the best places to begin the study of the subject. So we adjourn our introductory material here, and travel back to Ancient Athens!